

UP FROM EDEN

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, October 15, 2017

Lectionary Reading: Exodus 31:18–32:14.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My Favorite Image in Cartoons Is the Stages of Human Development

The lectionary reading is actually a great story — Moses and Aaron and the children of Israel and the Golden Calf. But let me start at a different place.

One of my favorite images, particularly in cartoons, has to do with the stages of human development, the stages of human evolution. There's a classic image of a fish, and then you have an amphibian crawling out, half in the water, half out of the water. Next, you've got a monkey or an ape and then a Neanderthal man hunched over and holding a spear. Now, there's an upright human being, and finally a joke pops up. You know, some poor slob working at a computer or something like that.

There are lots of different ways in which people have looked at the stages of human development, human consciousness, human evolution. Jean Piaget and Abraham Maslow, have studied the stages of human needs — first the physiological needs; superseded by the needs for safety and security; followed by belongingness and love in one's life; trailed by esteem, both self and from others; then followed ultimately by self-actualization — all from the previous century but of great influence yet today.

We've also learned that the human brain has three different levels: the reptilian brain deep inside, the limbic system, and the neocortex. When we're actually thinking about something, we're using the neocortex, but we don't use it that often. We tend to go back to the reptilian fight-or-flight notion a lot.

Stages of Consciousness from the Archaic to the Postmodern

One of my favorite researchers is Ken Wilbur, who writes on the stages of consciousness. His most recent book is *The Religion of Tomorrow: A Vision for the Future of the Great Traditions*, a full three inches thick. A great book.

Just to give you the subjects of his work, he talks about the Archaic age, which goes back to the dawn of time; followed by the Indigenous level of consciousness, going back 50,000 years ago; followed by Tribal, emerging about 15,000 years ago; superseded by Traditional, about 5,000 years ago, which is also called the pre-Axial age with Confucius and Buddha and several other luminary thinkers at that time, about 3,000 years before the time of Christ; followed by the modern age, beginning about 300 years ago; the Post-modern age beginning about 50 years ago; and then Wilbur has two more, in which we

are dabbling, so to speak, into an Integral understanding of human evolution and consciousness, a notion where the connectedness, the interrelatedness of it all is increasingly apparent; and then finally comes the ultimate level, Transpersonal, something seen by the mystics.

A similar kind of thing goes back to the Middle Ages. For me this is the most beautiful work of all. It comes from the Kaballah, Jewish mysticism, about which I've told you a bit before. There are four overlapping worlds, each one superseding the other — it's described by the God-human relationship — the base one being God as king, and we're servants or slaves. The next one up is that God is actually not so much king but is the parent, and we're children. The next one after that is lovers, and in each of these three levels there are still two entities; the parenting changes between them, but there are still two entities. The fourth level is simply oneness, in which the distinction between the two falls away.

One thing about all these different versions in the Kaballah is that they all insist that each level is operating always. One doesn't supersede and displace the other; they're still all operating. For example, we can seek self-actualization, but we still need food, we still need to breathe. We can be thinking deeply but we're still breathing, our heart is still pumping, operated by the limbic system, and the reptile is always at the alert. We may be postmodern, but we are definitely dipping our toe into integral thinking, and we are also still enmeshed in family and tribe and nation.

In Periods of Stress, Humans Are Likely to Revert to the Reptilian Brain

Here's why I'm telling you this stuff: In periods of stress, in periods of conflict, in periods in which we are feeling overwhelmed,

human beings tend to revert back. We become more primitive, more undeveloped, more primal, more reptilian.

That's what is going on with the children of Israel and the Golden Calf in our story. If you put yourself in their shoes for a moment, they have just had this profound experience of 400 years of slavery — longer than our country has been a country. That's all they have ever known. Suddenly, they burst into freedom, and now they're wandering in the wilderness. No place to call home yet. No food, no water of any reliability.

And now Moses, their supreme leader, in whom they placed all their trust, is AWOL. Went up on the mountain, didn't come back. He's just plain gone. And they revert back to their old religion, their old Gods, their old ways.

I would like to suggest to you, and this is not much of a stretch, that we are living in stressful times. We have a President who has historical low-approval ratings. We have for the first time, probably since the Reagan years, a genuine threat of nuclear war, and we can't get rid of terrorism, foreign and domestic. It just keeps showing up. So is this a stressful time? The only time, at least in my lifetime, that anything has been comparable, has been 1968. That was a tumultuous year.

And so the issue becomes that it's darn difficult to resist the temptation to revert. It's hard. Similarly, it's hard to keep pursuing the higher, the nobler. It's just hard.

Losing at a Computer Game Leads to Spiritual Imperfection

I'd like to give you two examples of this. These will seem strange to you, but I suggest that they're really spot on. What these examples illustrate is the same thing going on in

my spiritual life and probably in yours. Here's the first example:

I play a computer game in which little balls are shot at a collection of other balls, and I try to knock them down. The game has rules and levels of difficulty. It's something to help me go to sleep at night. So I sit there and play this game. It started off being easy. Not a problem. I could complete each level, but around level 20 or so, it started to get hard, and I had to work at it and didn't always succeed. But I kept at it and now am up to level 32 and attempting level 33. I have tried to win that level well over a hundred times. I came close once. Otherwise, there was abject failure over and over again.

Being human, I sort of get ticked off by this stupid game. I'm not going to play it anymore. I can't ever win it. So what I did was to go back to level 15 and start over. Now I can win again and can achieve the higher levels and am up into the 20's again. I'm still sitting there looking at level 33. I'll get it, even if it's going to take me 100, 200, 500 more tries before finally getting it. But I will.

It's the same thing with my spiritual life: My practice of the contemplative arts — meditation, prayer, contemplation — my ability to love my neighbor as myself, my ability to do unto others, not as they deserve but actually what unto others is, I would have them do unto me. My ability to do those things is compromised. Abject failure over and over again. But I keep trying. So I revert back and do the easy stuff. I can love my family and can love most of you guys. That's easy. But extending beyond, extending my circle of love. It's hard, and it's very tempting to revert back.

The Exigency of a Cartoon Results in Lower Self-Worth

The second example that I would give you: A number of years ago, I was at a crisis point career-wise, and I went away for three days of therapy — three days of career counseling/therapy down in Lancaster. Part of it was that they wanted to give me an IQ test. I'm not sure why, but maybe they had worries in some way because I'd never had an IQ test before.

One of the questions was fascinating in the way in which it was structured. What the instructors did was to present me with a cartoon story in four little panels, just like a cartoon on Sunday morning. Four little panels, except that they were jumbled. They weren't in the right order. My task was to put them in the right order. So you sit there, and you look at the four little pictures, and ten seconds later, you get them in the right order.

You turn the page. Okay now, here are eight little panels, and you're only given four of them, so half the story is missing, and the four are not in the right order. Put them in the right order. So you stare at it, and you realize you've not been given all the information. You stare at it for a while, and 30 seconds later I get it. I see what the story is now, and you put them in the right order.

You turn the page, and now here's a sixteen-panel story, and you're only given eight pictures jumbled up. Again, I'm sitting there staring at this thing, trying to figure out what the order is. I'm staring at it and staring at it and staring at it, and suddenly — I don't know how much time has passed but suddenly I get it. So I put them in the right order.

Once more, I turn the page, and there's a 32. I was working on that one, just starting it when time ran out. But I turned the page, and there's a 64 and I turn the page again, and there's a 128.

I started off feeling smart, and then I realized at the end of it, I felt so dumb. I'm sitting there working away on the 32 one, but there are people out there who can look at 64 with only 32 jumbled images and they can see right away what the order is. There are people out there who can do that. You take any human skill, any task, any challenge, and there are people who are gifted at it in our world.

So also, with our spirituality. We can settle for the four-panel one in our personal spirituality and never challenge ourselves. Never challenge to love beyond what is easy to love, to do good beyond what is easy to do good. We can settle for that and do the easy stuff all of our lives. But what I felt from looking at that question on the IQ test was that there's so much more beyond. And if that describes anything, it's the spiritual life. There is so much more beyond if we challenge ourselves to try and achieve that.

Veterans Lay a Tough Request at the Door of Our Church

Let me give you one more example. This is something that came up earlier in the week. I'm reluctant to use this example because I think it might make some of you uncomfortable and because it's right where we are at this time.

The church received a request last week from an organization called Veterans for Peace. You probably know of the organization or you might know some of the individuals in it. We have a Veterans' Day parade coming up, and their request is that they would like to use a portion of the church lawn on the parade route to recognize not only American deaths but also the other deaths that were the result of wars that Americans have been involved in.

This gets touchy for me because I've been raised American and it has just been painfully obvious all along that an American death is a more tragic thing than anybody else's death. I have felt that way for the majority of my life. I was raised that way. America first.

But here's where it becomes an issue for me because in Vietnam the best analysis that is out there is that the ratio of deaths was 1 to 43, so for every American death there were 43 Vietnamese deaths. For Iraq, it's 1 to 57. Many fewer American deaths and a much higher ratio. Going back to Vietnam, there are 58,318 names on the memorial in Washington, D.C. So that's over 58,000. I'll do the math for you: that's 2.5 million Vietnamese deaths.

What the veterans want to do — and you can question the taste of this if you want — but they want to make little cardboard headstones, and here's a headstone for every 5,000 American deaths. But now here's the collection of headstones for the other deaths.

In my theology, I try to imagine if an American death is more tragic in the mind of God than a Vietnamese death. That seems silly to me. We're all children of God, regardless of our nationality. Does God mourn the death of an American more than somebody else? I don't think so. You know, that seems silly. So now what's happening in my mind is that I'm seeing the difference between Godly thinking and Art's thinking, and I don't like it. The difference is a little bit too big for my comfort level. So here is my work to do, and I know that you're right there with me as well. You're probably feeling the same tension.

Let me conclude with a fascinating quote. Going back to those levels of human consciousness, human development. Here's a

quote by Ken Wilber again, writing in another one of his books, *A Brief History of Everything*. He writes:

“Are the mystics and sages insane? Because they all tell variations on the same story, don’t they? The story of awakening one morning and discovering you are one with the All, in a timeless and eternal and infinite fashion. Yes, maybe they are crazy, these divine fools. Maybe they are mumbling idiots in the face of the Abyss. Maybe they need a nice, understanding therapist. Yes, I’m sure that would help.

“But then, I wonder. Maybe the evolutionary sequence really is from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit, each transcending and including, each

with greater depth and greater consciousness and wider embrace. And in the higher reaches of evolution, maybe, just maybe, an individual’s consciousness does indeed touch infinity — a total embrace of the entire Kosmos — a Kosmic consciousness that is Spirit awakened to its own true nature. It’s at least plausible.

"And tell me: is that story, sung by mystics and sages the world over, any crazier than the scientific materialism story, which is that the entire sequence is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying absolutely nothing? Listen very carefully: Just which of those two stories actually sounds totally insane?"

Amen.